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ACTION WHA-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	CEA-01	CIAE-00	COME-00	CTME-00
	DODE-00	DOEE-00	DOTE-00	SRPP-00	DS-00	EAP-00	EB-00
	EUR-00	EXIM-01	E-00	FAAE-00	VC-00	FRB-00	H-01
	TEDE-00	INR-00	ITC-01	LAB-01	L-00	VCE-00	AC-01
	NSAE-00	OMB-01	OPIC-01	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00
	P-00	SP-00	IRM-00	SSO-00	STR-00	TRSE-00	USIE-00
	EPAE-00	PMB-00	DSCC-00	PRM-00	DRL-02	G-00	NFAT-00
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P 241653Z JAN 03
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9637
INFO WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPLOMATIC POST
AMEMBASSY LISBON
AMEMBASSY MADRID
AMEMBASSY VATICAN CITY
USCINCSO MIAMI FL
NSC WASHDC
USINT HAVANA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000191

NSC FOR LLORENS
STATE PASS USAID - DCHA/OTI (ULLRICH AND PORTER)
USCINCSO ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 1/23/13
TAGS: PGOV, PREL, ECON, OAS, VE
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PAGE 02 CARACA 00191 01 OF 03 241810Z
SUBJECT: VENEZUELA: THE STRIKE IN WEEK EIGHT

CLASSIFIED BY: CDA FREDERICK B. COOK. REASONS 1.5(B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) AS VENEZUELA'S NATIONAL STRIKE CONTINUES IN ITS EIGHTH WEEK, PRESIDENT CHAVEZ'S DETERMINATION TO PREVAIL IS MATCHED BY THE OPPOSITION'S RESOLVE TO FORCE EARLY ELECTIONS. THE STRIKE'S ECONOMIC EFFECTS, PARTICULARLY FROM LOST PETROLEUM REVENUES, ARE HITTING THE GOV HARD. ECONOMIC

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PRESSURES ARE ALSO SHAKING THE NON-PETROLEUM ASPECT OF THE STRIKE. THE FORMATION OF THE FRIENDS GROUP AND THE JANUARY 20 VISIT TO CARACAS BY FORMER PRESIDENT CARTER BOOSTED OAS SYG GAVIRIA'S FACILITATION EFFORTS. ONE CRITICAL POLITICAL EFFECT OF THE STRIKE HAS BEEN THE SPREAD OF PROTESTS BEYOND THE CAPITAL. THIS MESSAGE ALSO REVIEWS DEVELOPMENTS IN KEY ECONOMIC SECTORS SUCH AS PETROLEUM PRODUCTION, SHIPPING AND REFINING; COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY; FOOD SUPPLIES; TRANSPORTATION; BANKING; GOVERNMENT SERVICES; AND FINANCIAL. END SUMMARY.

POLITICS AND PETROLEUM

2. (C) VENEZUELA'S NATIONAL STRIKE IS IN ITS 54TH DAY AS OF JANUARY 24. [REDACTED] PRESIDENT HUGO CHAVEZ REMAINS DETERMINED TO FACE DOWN THE OPPOSITION, WHILE ACROSS THE
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DIVIDE, HIS POLITICAL FOES ARE STILL FIERCELY COMMITTED TO FORCING EARLY ELECTIONS. ALMOST DAILY, OPPONENTS OF THE GOVERNMENT GATHER FOR MARCHES AND DEMONSTRATIONS, NO LONGER JUST IN CAPITAL, BUT IN ALL PARTS OF THE COUNTRY. THE GOVERNMENT, WHICH PRIOR TO THE STRIKE RESPONDED WITH COUNTER MARCHES, NOW ROUTINELY APPEARS TO DEPLOY SUPPORTERS TO THE DESTINATION POINTS OF THE OPPOSITION MARCHES. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] SHOOTING AT THE OPPOSITION DEMONSTRATORS HAS ALSO BECOME PART OF THE PATTERN, ADDING DEATHS TO THE TOLL OF THE PROTESTS. IN THIS HEATED ENVIRONMENT, MANY FEARED THAT A MAJOR PRO-CHAVEZ MARCH THROUGH CARACAS ON JANUARY 23 WOULD LEAD TO VIOLENCE, BUT OPPOSITION LEADERS ASKED THEIR SUPPORTERS IN CARACAS TO REMAIN AT HOME WHILE PROCEEDING WITH ANTI-CHAVEZ MARCHES IN OTHER CITIES.

3. (C) FUEL SHORTAGES, WHICH ARE DRIVING THE COUNTRY INTO STEEP ECONOMIC DECLINE, ARE ANOTHER READILY VISIBLE SIGN OF THE STRIKE. LOST PETROLEUM REVENUE IS SEVERELY HURTING GOVERNMENT FINANCES. IT HAS ALSO PUT SO MUCH PRESSURE ON THE BOLIVAR THAT THE FINANCE MINISTRY HAS SUSPENDED FOREIGN EXCHANGE TRANSACTIONS AND WILL SOON LIKELY IMPOSE CURRENCY CONTROLS. THE GOV, ACUTELY FEELING THE PINCH OF GREATLY DIMINISHED REVENUES, IS SCRAMBLING TO RETURN PETROLEOS DE VENEZUELA (PDVSA) TO SOMETHING APPROACHING NORMAL OPERATIONS. THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF THE PDVSA STRIKE IS EXAMINED IN GREATER DETAIL IN PARAGRAPHS 6-7 BELOW, BUT "WINNING" THE BATTLE OVER PDVSA IS CRITICAL TO BOTH SIDES. THE GOV IS

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USING THE STRIKE TO RE-CONSTITUTE PDVSA AS A LOYAL ENTITY AND
REFUSING TO CONSIDER THE RETURN OF STRIKING EMPLOYEES.

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GAVIRIA, CARTER AND THE GROUP OF FRIENDS: NEW HOPE

4. (C) THE FORMATION OF THE FRIENDS GROUP OPENS THE
POSSIBILITY OF REACHING A RESOLUTION OF THE STRIKE. UNHAPPY
THAT THE INITIATIVE HAD NOT GONE HIS WAY, CHAVEZ COMPLAINED
THAT THE GROUP DID NOT INCLUDE "FRIENDS" SUCH AS ALGERIA,
RUSSIA, CHINA, CUBA OR FRANCE. HE TRAVELED UNEXPECTEDLY TO
BRAZIL AND UNSUCCESSFULLY SOUGHT TO CHANGE PRESIDENT LULA DA
SILVA'S MIND ABOUT THE GROUP. AT THE UN ON JANUARY 16, HE
CLAIMED THAT GAVIRIA IS IN CARACAS MERELY "IN A PERSONAL
CAPACITY," NOT AS OAS SEC GEN, AND [] CALLED FOR THE
EXPANSION OF THE FRIENDS GROUP TO INCLUDE CHAVEZ-LEANING
COUNTRIES WHOSE PARTICIPATION WOULD COMPLICATE GAVIRIA'S
EFFORTS. (GAVIRIA QUICKLY STRESSED PUBLICLY THAT HE IS
CONDUCTING THE TALKS IN AN OFFICIAL OAS CAPACITY.) CHAVEZ
REPEATED HIS REQUEST THAT THE GROUP BE EXPANDED IN HIS
"CADENA" OF JANUARY 22. FORMER PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER'S
PRESENTATION OF TWO PROPOSALS JANUARY 20 FOR AN ELECTORAL
SOLUTION TO THE CRISIS MAY OFFER ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY TO BREAK
THE IMPASSE.

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ACTION WHA-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	CEA-01	CIAE-00	COME-00	CTME-00
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5. (C) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES AND
INCONVENIENCES ARE HITTING HOME AMONG CORE OPPOSITION
CONSTITUENCIES. AN EXAMPLE OF AMBIVALENCE TOWARD THE STRIKE
CAN BE FOUND AMONG PARENTS, MANY OF WHOM IN DECEMBER BACKED
THE CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS IN SUPPORT OF THE STRIKE BUT NOW ARE
UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE PROSPECT OF THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION
REMAINING ON HOLD.

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THE STRIKE AND KEY ECONOMIC SECTORS

6. (C) PDVSA - PETROLEUM PRODUCTION AND SHIPPING: THE
DECISION BY PDVSA MANAGERS PLUS MANY BLUE COLLAR WORKERS TO
GO OFF THE JOB INITIALLY SHUT DOWN ALMOST ALL ACTIVITY.
SINCE THEN, USING THOSE WORKERS WHO DID NOT GO ON STRIKE,
RETIREEES, AND SOME FOREIGN OIL WORKERS, PDVSA'S OPERATIONS
HAVE COME BACK UP PARTIALLY. WE ESTIMATE PDVSA PRODUCTION IS
NOW AT LEAST [REDACTED] OF CRUDE (PRE-STRIKE
PRODUCTION WAS [REDACTED] ALTHOUGH PORT
OPERATIONS ARE BY NO MEANS NORMALIZED, TANKERS APPARENTLY ARE
LOADING WITH ENOUGH FREQUENCY TO MOVE THIS LOW PRODUCTION
VOLUME. MANY KEY FUNCTIONS, PARTICULARLY RELATED TO SALES
AND ACCOUNTING, REMAIN ALMOST NON-FUNCTIONAL. THE GOV
CONTINUES TO SEEK TO RECONSTRUCT PDVSA IN ITS OWN IMAGE, WITH
A NEW BOARD, AND DISMISSALS OF HUNDREDS OF MORE SENIOR
STRIKING WORKERS.

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7. (C) PDVSA - REFINING AND GASOLINE: OF VENEZUELA'S REFINERIES, ONLY ONE, PUERTO LA CRUZ IS FUNCTIONING, PRODUCING LIMITED QUANTITIES OF UNLEADED GASOLINE. EFFORTS TO PARTIALLY RESTART THE EL PALITO REFINERY AND THE MASSIVE PARAGUANA REFINING COMPLEX HAVE NOT BORNE FRUIT. RETAIL SUPPLIES OF GASOLINE HAVE BEEN SEVERELY AFFECTED. PETROLEUM OPPOSITION SPOKESMEN HAVE ESTIMATED THAT ONLY ONE IN FIVE CARS ARE FULL (ALTHOUGH TRAFFIC JAMS CAN STILL OCCUR IN CARACAS). PDVSA HAS SOUGHT TO MOVE EXISTING REFINED STOCKS THROUGH THE DISTRIBUTION CHAIN, AND

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[REDACTED] HAS OBTAINED SOME GASOLINE ON THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET. CARACAS IS CURRENTLY IN A GASOLINE DROUGHT PERIOD, ALTHOUGH A TANKER-LOAD FROM TRINIDAD IS EXPECTED SHORTLY.

8. (C) COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY: VENEZUELA'S NON-PETROLEUM INDUSTRIAL SECTOR HAS GENERALLY ABIDED BY THE STRIKE, EXCEPT FOR THE PRODUCTION OF CERTAIN FOOD PRODUCTS (SEE BELOW). WITH LARGE FIRMS STILL PAYING THEIR WORKERS, THEIR FINANCIAL LOSSES ARE MOUNTING, AND MANY ARE BECOMING DELINQUENT ON BANK LOANS. LARGE-SCALE RETAIL COMMERCE, SUCH AS THAT IN SHOPPING CENTERS, HAS SIMILARLY ADHERED TO THE STRIKE, AND HAD TO FOREGO KEY CHRISTMAS SALES. PARTICIPATION BY SMALL BUSINESS IN THE STRIKE HAS VARIED GREATLY. FROM THE BEGINNING STORES AND RESTAURANTS HAVE BEEN LARGELY OPEN IN WESTERN CARACAS AND POORER NEIGHBORHOODS. IN UPPER INCOME EASTERN CARACAS, THERE HAS BEEN MUCH STRONGER PARTICIPATION; HOWEVER, SINCE THE NEW YEAR, THERE HAS BEEN INCREASING SLIPPAGE. IN PARTICULAR, SOME RESTAURANTS ARE RE-OPENING.

9. (C) FOOD SUPPLIES: IN LARGE MEASURE BECAUSE OF
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COOPERATION BETWEEN THE GOV AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR, IN SPITE OF THE STRIKE, THE NETWORK OF FOOD PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION HAS REMAINED FUNCTIONAL, THOUGH FRAGILE. THE GOV HAS GIVEN PRIORITY TO ENSURING THAT TRUCKS DELIVERING FOOD HAVE FUEL. THE PRIVATE SECTOR HAS PLEDGED TO MAINTAIN SUFFICIENT PRODUCTION TO ASSURE SUPPLY OF A "BASIC BASKET" OF FOODSTUFFS, AND STRIKING FACTORIES HAVE COME BACK ON LINE WHERE NECESSARY. THERE HAVE, HOWEVER, BEEN SPOT SHORTAGES OF SOME IMPORTANT PRODUCTS SUCH AS PRE-COOKED CORNMEAL AND POWDERED MILK. THE GOV IS SEEKING IMPORTS OF KEY COMMODITIES, BUT IS HINDERED BY THE FACT THAT VENEZUELA'S PORTS REMAIN LARGELY CLOSED. FOR INSTANCE ONLY SIX SHIPS HAVE DOCKED IN CARACAS'S PORT OF LA GUAIRA SINCE THE STRIKE BEGAN. FRESH MEAT AND VEGETABLES REMAIN IN REASONABLE SUPPLY; HOWEVER, THERE ARE INCREASING SHORTAGES OF PACKAGING

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MATERIALS. THE GOV PERIODICALLY OPENED "MEGA-MARKETS" IN POORER NEIGHBORHOODS OF CARACAS AND OTHER CITIES TO EASE FEARS OF FOOD SHORTAGES. MIDDLE AND UPPER INCOME VENEZUELAN RELY ON SUPERMARKETS, WHICH ARE OPEN ON A LIMITED SCHEDULE. LARGELY SUPPLIED FROM STOCKS IN WAREHOUSES, THE VARIETY OF PRODUCTS IS INCREASINGLY IN DECLINE. SHORTAGES OF BOTTLED NATURAL GAS FOR COOKING HAVE BEEN A PROBLEM, ALTHOUGH THIS HAS EASED SOMEWHAT IN RECENT DAYS.

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ACTION WHA-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	CEA-01	CIAE-00	COME-00	CTME-00
	DODE-00	DOEE-00	DOTE-00	SRPP-00	DS-00	EAP-00	EB-00
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	P-00	SP-00	IRM-00	SSO-00	STR-00	TRSE-00	USIE-00
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10. (C) TRANSPORTATION: THE STRIKE HAS SOMEWHAT AFFECTED

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THE OPERATION OF VENEZUELA'S PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM. WITHIN CARACAS, BUS AND METRO SERVICE HAS CONTINUED SO FAR, ALTHOUGH TRANSPORT UNIONS BOOSTED THE STRIKE TEMPORARILY. INTER-CITY BUS AND CARGO TRANSPORTATION HAS CONTINUED, ALTHOUGH IT HAS BEEN AFFECTED SIGNIFICANTLY BY FUEL SHORTAGES. DECREASED DEMAND HAS LED TO THE CANCELLATION OF MANY INTERNAL FLIGHTS. INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS OUT OF CARACAS' SIMON BOLIVAR (MAIQUETIA) AIRPORT REMAIN NORMAL, ALTHOUGH SOME FLIGHTS HAVE BEEN CANCELED BECAUSE OF DECREASED DEMAND.

11. (C) BANKING: BANKS HAVE BEEN OPERATING ON A REDUCED SCHEDULE, WHICH HAS LED TO LONG LINES, BUT MOST BANKING SERVICES HAVE BEEN MAINTAINED. THE GOV HAS SOUGHT TO FORCE BANKS TO REVERT TO A FULL SCHEDULE, AND THREATENED (BUT NOT IMPLEMENTED) SEVERE FINANCIAL PENALTIES. ON JANUARY 9-10, THE BANKING WORKERS' UNION CALLED A 48-HOUR STRIKE, IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE GENERAL STRIKE. THIS CALL WAS SIGNIFICANTLY OBEYED. WITH FEWER DEPOSITS AS A RESULT OF THE GENERAL STRIKE, DEBTORS (BOTH INDIVIDUAL AND CORPORATE) ARE EVER LESS ABLE TO PAY THEIR LOANS. CONCERNS ARE RISING ABOUT THE OVERALL HEALTH OF THE BANKING SYSTEM; SEVERAL BANKS HAVE REPORTEDLY SOUGHT HELP FROM THE CENTRAL BANK.

12. (C) GOVERNMENT SERVICES: SINCE THE STRIKE BEGAN ON DECEMBER 2, MOST GOVERNMENT OFFICES HAVE KEPT THEIR REGULAR HOURS (IN SOME CASES REDUCED DURING THE CHRISTMAS VACATION). THE PRINCIPAL EXCEPTION HAS BEEN CUSTOMS OFFICERS AT PORTS,
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WHO IN MANY CASES HAVE JOINED THE STRIKE. ON JANUARY 6, THE SCHOOL YEAR BEGAN AGAIN. PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE AT LEAST NOMINALLY OPEN, BUT ATTENDANCE IS LOW. IN MANY CASES TEACHERS ARE BRIEFLY COMING TO WORK, AND THEN LEAVING WHEN THEY FIND THAT FEW STUDENTS ARE THERE. TEACHERS' UNIONS ARE SUPPORTING THE STRIKE.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] NORMAL TRANSFERS OF MONEY FROM THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT TO STATE GOVERNMENT HAVE BEEN DELAYED IN MANY CASES.

13. (C) MACRO AND FINANCIAL: THE GOV HAS NOT PRODUCED GDP FIGURES FOR THE FOURTH QUARTER OF 2002, ALTHOUGH IT IS INEVITABLE THAT THERE WILL BE SHARPLY NEGATIVE GROWTH. IN JANUARY THE BOLIVAR PLUMMETED IN VALUE TO 1800/USD, WHICH ULTIMATELY WILL HAVE INFLATIONARY CONSEQUENCES, WITH RESERVES DROPPING AT A RATE OF 100-150 MILLION USD PER DAY. ON JANUARY 23 THE GOV SUSPENDED FOR FIVE DAYS ALL FOREIGN EXCHANGE TRANSACTIONS. IT IS EXPECTED SHORTLY TO IMPOSE STRICT CURRENCY CONTROLS. IN THE FACE OF THE LOSS OF

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PETROLEUM AND OTHER REVENUE, THE GOV HAS ANNOUNCED THAT THE 2003 BUDGET WILL BE CUT BACK, BUT HAS NOT ANNOUNCED ANY FIGURES. TO REMAIN CURRENT ON PDVSA'S FOREIGN DEBT AND TO PAY FOR GASOLINE IMPORTS, THE GOV HAS DRAWN DOWN ON ITS INVESTMENT FUND FOR MACRO-ECONOMIC STABILIZATION (FIEM) AND IS EXPECTED TO MAKE FURTHER WITHDRAWALS. THE GOV HAS REPORTED ACCESSED ACCOUNTS BELONG TO THE FDIC-EQUIVALENT TO MEET CURRENT EXPENDITURES, [REDACTED]

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COMMENT

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14. (C) VENEZUELA'S INTERNAL POLITICAL DYNAMIC EVOLVES ALMOST DAILY, AS BOTH SIDES CONTINUOUSLY EVALUATE AND REACT TO NEW DEVELOPMENTS. THUS FAR, NO FACTOR (OR COMBINATION OF FACTORS) HAS BEEN SUFFICIENT EITHER TO "DEFEAT" ONE SIDE POLITICALLY OR TO COMPEL THEM TO REACH AN ACCORD. [REDACTED]

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